
AUGUST STRINDBERG:

‘I’M A DEVILISH FELLOW WHO CAN DO MANY TRICKS’

A hundred years after his death, August Strindberg (1849–1912) continues to fascinate. He was a trailblazer and innovator in his time and still manages to provoke audiences in theaters around the world.

There is always an aspect of Strindberg’s character – from the raging sociopolitical polemicist to the psychologically introspective writer – that fits the prevailing spirit and intellectual climate of the times. His thoughts on morality, class, power structures and familial politics are still relevant today. The unflagging struggle for free thinking and free speech that he waged throughout his life is more important than ever in a time when censorship prevails in many countries.

Another reason for Strindberg’s popularity is his accessibility. While some older literature can feel dated, he used everyday language, and today his texts feel remarkably modern.

Man of many talents
People are amazed by Strindberg’s versatility. He tackled most genres. Aside from being an innovator in drama and prose, he was a poet, a painter, a photographer, even a sinologist.

Strindberg’s stormy private life also explains his enduring appeal, especially since it is so integral to his work.

It is difficult to separate Strindberg’s life from his work. He believed a writer’s work reflected the life the writer led. His literary development largely followed the twists and turns of his private life, including the crises arising from his marriage break-ups and political controversies.

Upbringing and studies
Johan August Strindberg was born on 22 January 1849. He would later claim that his childhood was one of poverty and neglect but the family was not poor. His father was a shipping agent who married his housekeeper. They had eight children. Strindberg’s mother died young, and relations with his father
were strained. After a violent quarrel in 1876, father and son never saw each other again.

Following graduation from senior high school in 1867, Strindberg led a nomadic life. He worked as a school teacher and tutor, studied medicine, tried to become an actor – all to no avail. At Uppsala University, where he studied on and off, people found him insufferable given his constant desire to antagonize teachers. However, he was considered to have promise as a writer. He worked for a while as a journalist at Dagens Nyheter, Sweden’s largest morning newspaper, and as an assistant librarian at the Royal Library in Stockholm.

It was around this time that he met Siri von Essen, his first wife. She was a married, upper-class Swedish-speaking Finn with acting ambitions. Their love was stormy, veering between lust and hatred. After many ups and downs, the couple married in 1877.

Literary breakthrough and exile
In 1879, Strindberg’s satirical novel The Red Room was published. It was his literary breakthrough. Encouraged by this success, he continued to write, and his works often attacked the authorities in Sweden.

Following the publication of his withering satire The New Kingdom (1882), reactions were so hostile that Strindberg was forced to leave Sweden. So began a period of exile, with Strindberg and his family moving around Europe. The scandals back home multiplied; following the publication of his short story collection Getting Married (1884-86), he was charged with blasphemy. Strindberg was acquitted, but the experience made him increasingly mentally unstable and paranoid.

Strindberg’s persecution complex also consumed his marriage which had become increasingly strained. Strindberg’s marital crisis coincided with the rise of the women’s movement, and this most likely is partly the basis for his scornful view of women.

The Inferno crisis
Strindberg divorced in 1891 and moved to Berlin, where he embarked on a brief marriage to the Austrian journalist Frida Uhl. The couple had a daughter but soon separated, and Strindberg moved to Paris. There he entered a period of his life in which he was tormented by invisible enemies and hallucinations, the so-called Inferno crisis. During this time, he also became interested in the natural sciences and alchemy.

Return to Sweden
After the Inferno crisis, Strindberg achieved a more peaceful state of mind and returned to Sweden. He married for the third time, the actress Harriet Bosse. The marriage was brief; soon after the birth of their daughter, Anne-Marie, in 1902 the couple separated. In 1907, Strindberg launched the Intimate Theater in Stockholm together with the actor August Falck. He returned to writing social criticism and got caught up in what became known as the Strindberg Feud. (See page 4.)

Illness and death
During the final years of his life, Strindberg lived in an apartment in central Stockholm that is now a museum. The actress Fanny Falkner, his last great love, lived in the same building. On 14 May 1912, August Strindberg died, probably of stomach cancer. Some 60,000 people joined his funeral procession. The newspapers that had once been so critical of him now ran glowing obituaries – an irony of fate for a writer who had spent his entire life opposing the establishment.
Strindberg is best known as a dramatist, with his plays still performed on stages around the world. For instance, a major Strindberg festival was held in China in 2005, and in the summer of 2011 his play The Pelican was performed in Beijing.

Strindberg’s plays have influenced writers and directors including Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, Franz Kafka, Eugene O’Neill and Ingmar Bergman, to name but a few.

Strindberg’s plays were first performed in Denmark, Germany and Austria. It was only after the German-speaking countries had embraced him that Swedes began to show an interest.

Strindberg was a cosmopolite. He spent a third of his life in Germany, France, Switzerland, Denmark and Austria where he was able to absorb intellectual trends. A number of his works were originally written in French. As Strindberg remarked, ‘I must be a European first before my word will count in Sweden!’

Strindberg considered his plays his most important means of expression. He wrote some 60 plays in different genres and styles. No other playwright over the past 100 years has been as innovative in as many different genres.

Historical dramas
Most of Strindberg’s earliest efforts were

Strindberg expressed himself in more than words. His creativity also encompassed painting and photography. He painted extensively during several periods of his life. For a while he even tried to make a living from painting while based in Paris. He tended to focus on nature, especially the Swedish archipelago. His works became darker over time, with the open sea a recurring theme.

As a teenager Strindberg developed an interest in photography, at first as a purely scientific experiment but then with more purpose and bolder ideas. He took pictures of himself and his family, explored photojournalism, made cloud studies and experimented with color photography. Today there are only about 60 Strindberg photos in existence.

Strindberg dressed as a Russian nihilist, self-portrait, Gersau, Switzerland, 1886.
THE STRINDBERG FEUD

In 1910, Strindberg started one of the biggest cultural debates Sweden has ever seen, the Strindberg Feud. It started out as an attack on the prevailing literary powers. What was initially purely a literary debate soon moved onto suffrage, national defense and the role of the Swedish Academy. The Strindberg Feud lasted for more than two years and still had not ended with Strindberg’s death in 1912.

TAKING ON STRINDBERG

Danish actress
Ghita Norby (1935–)

‘We’ve performed The Dance of Death for over a year now and have had 136 sold-out houses. That’s a long time to dance with Strindberg. He’s incredibly difficult. It’s like a test at the most advanced level. He goes straight to your soul, without mercy. Every performance night takes a little bit of your heart. If you’ve played a Strindberg role, you carry a piece of it with you your entire life.’

French director
Claude Chabrol (1930–2010)

‘The Dance of Death isn’t depressing at all. The play functions as a cleansing bath for the audience. It is the most clear-sighted of all Strindberg’s dramas, and there’s a lot of bitterness and hate. But when we get to the end, it’s not as cut anymore. The last scene is very strange, but I see it almost like a declaration of love between the husband and wife.’

‘The reason I chose The Dance of Death is because it is the most ingeniously structured of all Strindberg’s plays. I think that play and The Ghost Sonata are his best works. They’re timeless, whereas Miss Julie, for instance, describes relationships between people from a time already past.’

English actor and director
Alan Rickman (1946–)

‘Watching or working on the plays of Strindberg is like seeing the skin, flesh and bones of life separated from each other. Challenging and timeless.’

Strindberg with Karin, Greta and Hans, three of his children from his first marriage, in 1886.

historical dramas, a popular genre in the late 19th century and one he would return to many times in the course of his writing. Shakespeare’s works were an influence, especially his psychologically nuanced characters.

After a few poorly received plays, including The Freethinker (1869) and In Rome (1870), Strindberg made his breakthrough as a dramatist in 1881 with the first performance of Master Olof, which he had reworked several times since he wrote it in 1872. For the play Strindberg, influenced by Goethe among others, decided to break with dramatic conventions which included writing in verse and a declamatory style of acting. Instead, he used a number of different settings and colloquial dialogue. The play, about the Protestant reformer Olaus Petri, was acclaimed for its psychological realism, a novelty at a time when dramas were dominated by the idealistic depiction of characters. Strindberg’s work in this genre include eight plays about Swedish monarchs.

Naturalist plays

Naturalism in drama first emerged as a significant force in the late 1880s, and Strindberg played an important role in this development. His international breakthrough came with his great naturalist tragedies The Father (1887), Miss Julie (1888) and Creditors (1889).

Strindberg was a pioneer of the serious one-act play. He created the first naturalist drama with Miss Julie and shocked his contemporaries. In the preface, he set forth the criteria for a naturalist play: the drama should be unvarnished and close to reality; there should be no fabricated plot; no division into acts; no painted scenery; and the characters should be multidimensional.

Strindberg’s naturalist dramas are imbued with Darwinian and Nietzschean ideas – presenting a struggle between the strong and the weak, and often between the sexes. In The Father, a wife tries to make her husband believe he is mad, while in Strindberg’s most frequently staged play, Miss Julie, the power struggle plays out on several levels: between different social classes and between a man and a woman. In this chamber play, aristocratic Miss Julie is seduced and manipulated into committing suicide by an ambitious servant, Jean.

Other naturalist dramas by Strindberg include The Stronger and Pariah (both 1888–90), which respectively describe the struggles between two women and two men. The Dance of Death (1900) is one of Strindberg’s darkest depictions of marriage, with the naturalism punctuated by dreamlike sequences.

Fairy-tale plays

In stark contrast to Strindberg’s realistic dramas are his fairy tale and dream
Strindberg’s plays, allegorical dramas with elements of fantasy. Strindberg’s first drama in this genre was *Lucky Peter’s Travels* (1882), most likely inspired by Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. Other plays with a fairy-tale quality are *Simoom* (1889) and the play *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1892).

The trilogy *The Road to Damascus* (1898–1904) was written toward the end of Strindberg’s Inferno crisis, and describes his road to reconciliation and conversion to Christianity. Form-wise the play broke new ground: reality and dreams are interwoven with a doppelganger motif and surreal dream scenes.

In *A Dream Play* (1901), Strindberg takes the experimental elements of *The Road to Damascus* even further. The story centers on the daughter of the god Indra, who comes down to earth. One of Strindberg’s best-known lines, ‘It is not easy to be a human being!’ comes from this play. Strindberg wrote about its unusual structure in the preface:

*Time and space do not exist; the imagination spins, weaving new patterns on a flimsy basis of reality: a mixture of memories, experiences, free associations, absurdities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, dissolve and merge. But one consciousness rules them all: the dreamer’s; for him there are no secrets, no inconsistencies, no scruples and no laws.*

### Satirical novels

Strindberg’s breakthrough as a novelist came in 1879 with his debut, *The Red Room*. It wasn’t just his first literary success, it also launched a new era in Swedish literature. The story of a young idealist, Arvid Falk, leading a bohemian life in Stockholm’s cultural and journalistic circles is based on Strindberg’s own experiences. A realistic contemporary satire, it incorporates colloquial language and an earthiness that were unusual in novels of that time. In many of his subsequent works, Strindberg maintained the biting social criticism found in *The Red Room*. Books such as *The Swedish People* (1881–82) and August Strindberg’s *Small Catechism for the Working Class* (1884) contain sharp attacks on the state, the schools and the church, as does his satire *The New Kingdom*.

### Poetry

Strindberg’s poems were radical both in content and form. As in his prose, Strindberg used colloquial language, writing in free or irregular verse. Thematically, the poems range from satire to more delicate works about love and the archipelago. The poetry cycle *Sleepwalking Nights* (1884) is a sequence of five philosophical poems considered to be one of Strindberg’s most significant works.

### Revealing stories

Much of Strindberg’s prose is autobiographical. In *The Son of a Servant* (1886), he recounts his upbringing and early years as a writer. Nonetheless, it is not an autobiography; the novel is told in the third person. Nor is Strindberg completely reliable as the narrator of his life. For instance, he presents his upbringing as far more proletarian than it actually was.

*The Confession of a Fool* (1887-88), written during the turmoil of his marriage to Siri von Essen, is one of Strindberg’s most revealing novels. The work generated considerable discussion about the way the wife was portrayed. Previously, he had launched a direct attack on the feminism of the day and on marriage as an institution in his two-volume short story collection, *Getting Married* (1884–86).

Between 1894 and 1896, Strindberg underwent a severe religious and mental crisis, the so-called Inferno crisis. After a long break in his writing, he wrote the novel *Inferno* (1897), which describes a
tortured soul consumed by delusions of supernatural powers. *Legends* (1898) and *Jacob Wrestles* (1898) were continuations of *Inferno*. The Inferno crisis also gave rise to perhaps his most scathing work, *From an Occult Diary* (1896–1908).

**Archipelago sketches**
Strindberg spent a good deal of time in Stockholm’s archipelago. His lifelong love of the place imbued his prose and his paintings. A recurring theme in his archipelago books is the conflict between town and country, civilization and nature. *The People of Hemsö* (1887) is one of Strindberg’s most widely read archipelago novels, unusually easygoing despite its dark, bitter tone.

A far darker depiction of archipelago life is *By the Open Sea* (1890) which, like *The People of Hemsö*, portrays the conflicts between the local population and outsiders.

**Issues with women**
Strindberg’s views on women’s independence are highly controversial. Even in his own time, Strindberg was considered by many to be a misogynist, which he emphatically denied. He was not opposed to women but rather to the women’s movement, he said. He felt persecuted by what he called the ‘international women’s league’, and in essays such as *Woman’s Inferiority to Man* (1890) he spread his views abroad. The negative descriptions of women in Strindberg’s works generally coincided with the crises in his marriages.

Strindberg’s view of women has engendered many interpretations. Is it possible to read Strindberg and overlook the scathing depictions of women? To what extent was his view of women the effect of an unstable mind? In which case, how should we approach his work? Opinion on this issue – as with so much of Strindberg’s work – is still divided.

**USEFUL LINKS**

- [www.auguststrindberg.se](http://www.auguststrindberg.se) The Strindberg Society
- [www.extrapris.com/astrindberg.html](http://www.extrapris.com/astrindberg.html) Detailed website about Strindberg
- [www.strindbergsmuseet.se](http://www.strindbergsmuseet.se) The Strindberg Museum
- [www.tassla.org](http://www.tassla.org) The August Strindberg Society of Los Angeles (TASSLA)